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Journaling as a Writing Practice

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Abstract

This essay discusses the value of journal writing as a research and analytical practice for writers, and examines how recording experiences, thoughts, ideas and epiphanies, can benefit the creative process of storytelling. Throughout the ages, journals, dairies, notes and letters have served not only as outlets of expression and emotional release for their writers, but also as rich sources of data for researchers and general readership. While the practice of journaling ultimately benefits the writer through the creation and understanding of their stories, the greatest challenge remains finding the time and summoning the discipline to perform it.

In the journal, I am at ease—Anais Nin

The act of recording life's daily happenings, whether significant or trivial, remains one of civilization's oldest and most accessible practices. It has served to record some of history's greatest events, as well as the mundane details of lives lived, and represents to the academic and scientific community, as well as to writers and interested readers, valuable insight into human existence through the ages.

This essay focuses on the practice of journaling—recording the 'significant and the trivial' for the purpose of storytelling. In terms of a writer's research methodology, it poses the question: how does keeping a journal assist in the creation of stories?

This essay examines the motives and means by which writers record, analyse, and evaluate their thoughts and ideas to achieve storytelling goals, even if that goal is solely to produce a record of the 'lived experience' for posterity and reflection.

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Finally, and pertaining to my own writing practices, this essay highlights the value of journaling techniques, such as stream-of-thought writing, ethnography, and auto-ethnography, in producing fictional and nonfictional narratives (short stories, travel articles etc.) for popular readership. In doing so, I hope to show how journaling practice authenticates a writer's work and better assists them in presenting their stories with confidence.

What is Journaling?

Simply stated, journaling is the practice of recording events, actions, happenings of personal significance, or resonance, on a regular basis. The difference between journaling and diary-keeping is subtle: whereas a diary records daily events and experiences for emotional satisfaction and comfort, a journal represents a meditated effort by the writer to gather 'data' which promises some greater purpose. That is, once evaluated, analysed and reflected on, journal notes can inform and inspire a writer's work, while also serving as a well-spring for ideas for future applications.

The differences are less important to readers whose interest lies in the 'effect' of text rather than its value as a data source. The published diaries of prominent people throughout history, and in modern times, enthrall and fascinate, and allow us glimpses of life in other times. The observations of Murasaki Shikibu (c.973-c.1020) on imperial court life during the Heian Period, for instance, communicate the same beauty, order and timelessness which infuse her masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*.

I can see the garden from the room beside the entrance to the gallery. The air is misty, the dew is still on the leaves. The Lord Prime Minister is walking there ... He breaks off a stalk of menaishi ... which is in full bloom by the south end of the bridge. He peeps in over my screen! His noble appearance embarrasses us, and I am ashamed of my morning (not-yet-made-up) face. He says, 'Your poem on this! If you delay so much the fun is gone!' (*The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, Great Diaries, 2020)

The motivations for recording mood and moment can range from a simple urge to express oneself, as shown by the writings of a young Jewish girl during World War II, to a spontaneous need to capture epiphanies and revelations as they appear, as noted by a Mexican artist coming to terms with her physical injuries, and illustrated here:

When I write, I can shake off all my cares. My sorrow disappears, my spirits

are revived! (The Diary of Anne Frank, Great Diaries, 2020)

Anguish and pain, pleasure and death are no more than a process for existence.
(The Diary of Frida Kahlo, Great Diaries, 2020)

Journaling and diary-keeping both serve as a cathartic practice through which stress is relieved and anxieties can be confronted, better understood and managed. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to deprive people around the world of social and family contact, as well as exacerbating health, job, and financial worries, writing has become a therapeutic practice for many. Glenn Kramon (2020) for the New York Times notes, ‘By writing at these times, you’re at least moving forward, beginning to sort things out. Reading back on what you just wrote, you get a clearer sense for what went wrong and how to improve. And you don’t feel so alone in your loneliest hour.’

Similarly, for writers, by analysing lived experience we may ‘make sense of ourselves’ and unpick hidden meanings which lead to self-realisations and epiphanies. A journal-keeper, by virtue, is a writer. Yet, a journal represents more than just a place to note observations and feelings; it becomes a place to ponder and ‘play’ with the data, to evaluate and analyse it, and to allow ideas to evolve which will hopefully serve the writer’s practice.

Journaling as a research methodology

Writers have the Internet to thank for ease of access to data which they can cross-check for accuracy and authenticity. Stories, however, are not built on data alone. Data must undergo a process of evaluation and questioning: can it contribute to a ‘sense of story’, a compelling plot with interesting characters, meaningful themes, and a feeling of ‘being there’?

To this end, a writer’s journal is a workbook which encourages the development and shaping of ideas, authenticates the story through records of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings and moods, and creates new meanings which, in turn, give rise to new ways of perceiving the world. This is particularly helpful to writers in recognising different perspectives with which readers may read narratives. A journal, like the Internet, is an evolving source of data.

Writers of fiction and nonfiction, journalists, screenplay writers, poets will act on their data differently and according to their needs. A travel journalist, for instance, writes to inform and entertain, and therefore relies on anecdotes, facts and figures, chance meetings, impressions with unique characters, and semiotics (the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation—Oxford definition) to

write a travel story.

Fiction writers, on the other hand, may use ethnographic research techniques to record their impressions of time and place, cultural idiosyncrasies, traditions, rituals, as well as sights, smells and sounds, in order to convey a sense of realism in their stories. In any case, the reader will ultimately benefit from the writer's research efforts.

As a research methodology, journal-keeping also allows for experimentation. Using Rainer's 'stream of thought' (1978) system has enabled me to create a large body of data during my travels over the past three decades. To better understand this data, and its possible applications, I can look to auto-ethnographic research techniques, asking, 'where do I fit in this setting?' or 'what is my honest reaction to this situation?'. Analysis in this way assists in the creation of authentic settings and true-to-life characters within narratives, because they ask of the writer truthfulness and honesty when examining their own data.

Taken from a travel journal kept while hiking the Annapurna trail in the Nepalese Himalaya, the following excerpt, while not revealing my personal feelings about the setting, evokes on reflection a sense of mystery, timelessness and exoticness which may prove useful to a future writing project, such as a short fiction story in the adventure or mystery genre.

A heavy veil of mist hangs over the village. It resembles a ghost town built on cold grey granite, devoid of colour and life, save for a holy tree at its centre which has been slung with once-colourful but now faded prayer flags in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Entering the stone alleys, human faces appear from the mist: round faces, ruddied by wind and high altitude sunshine. They are the faces of Tibetan merchants selling trinkets and other knick-knacks to the climbing parties. Business is slow; it's too cold for shopping. Exhausted trekkers have long since taken refuge in their sparsely furnished guest rooms or gone to huddle around the kitchen fires of their teahouse inns. (Rowe, 1993)

Bourke and Neilsen (2004), in their essay *The Problem of the Exegesis in Creative Writing Higher Degrees*, use the term 'first order' journaling to describe writing which contains impressions 'relevant only to the writer', as the above excerpt shows. The process of analysing, evaluating, and synthesizing this data is called 'second order' journaling, or the 'writing about writing ... because it is self-conscious, evaluative, critical.' For writers, this is an intensely conscious process where the serious work of 'reviewing the progression of the research' begins (Colbert 2010), and can be especially useful to projects, such as novels and biographies, where large amounts of data must be gleaned, sorted, matched and

made sense of.

Journaling practice applied to storytelling

With regard to my own writing practices, journal-keeping is both indispensable and necessary in producing stories of fiction and nonfiction. Travel journalism requires entertaining and ‘transporting’ the reader, while offering them practical details of an unfamiliar place. A writer’s journal, therefore, needs to contain facts and figures which will authenticate a story, as well as impressions and experiences that will add narrative-interest and cultural insight. The following passage illustrates how a journal informs the finished story:

It’s only when the last day-tripper has departed that the quiet rhythms of tilling, planting and harvesting creep back across Hattoji’s lush hillsides. The rural atmosphere couldn’t be stronger inside the vast tatami grass-mat room of Hattoji villa, where guests gather for a nightcap and the glow of the irori embers is the sole source of light. (Rowe, 2002)

In terms of ‘second-order’ journaling, the following passage provides an example of the ‘lived experience’ and how it directly informs the writer’s tone and perspective, creating a direct ‘voice’ to engage the reader.

Traffic is light; the fishing fleets are in and the last ferry is scuttling back to the port of Kasaoka on the mainland. A fat buoy ding-dongs, its light aglow, indicating my midway point. This is where I pull you up, dear reader, to tell you I’ve suddenly changed my mind. I will break the code sealed in red wine and “bloody oaths” by a small band of expatriate English teachers who have made Japan their home. They call themselves the Salty Dogs: 10 men from the four corners who will drop everything at the first whiff of spring to break out their kayaks and race the Seto’s two-metre tides to a tiny jewel called Kajiko Island. Remember that name. (Rowe, 2014)

Conclusion

To quote French writer and literary theorist, Maurice Blanchot: ‘The truth of the journal does not lie in the interesting and literary remarks to be found in it, but the insignificant details that tie it to everyday reality.’ Journaling requires the writer to make an honest, habitual, and dedicated practice of recording their thoughts, experiences and ideas, if their words will someday serve a purpose—be that a

published story, or a truthful account of their own ‘lived experience’.

Developments in technology mean writers now have at their disposal digital apps like Day One, Grid Dairy, Dabble Me, and Penzu, which they can download, and for a small monthly fee, create journals with a multimedia feel that incorporates photos, music, gifs, and hyperlinks to websites. However, there is much to be said for simply putting pen or pencil to paper—the very act of creating a permanent record requires the writer to think about the words, and their meaning, being formed by their own hand.

Concluding, it has been shown how the practice of journaling benefits both the writer and the reader in the creation and understanding of stories. But perhaps the greatest challenge facing the writer-researcher is finding the time and summoning the discipline to perform it.

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